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Bullying at Lincoln Middle School

A Case Study

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In today's age of increasing accountability and scrutiny for school leaders, the issue of school bullying is perhaps one of the most prominent challenges that the school administrator will address. This case study seeks to illuminate the topic of bullying, specifically within the middle school context, while drawing upon recent research and organizational theory. Lincoln Middle School is not unlike many middle schools across the nation that experience students bullying others. The administrators of Lincoln Middle use their greatest resource, their own staff and students, to address this issue and ultimately succeed in improving their school climate.

Keywords: *bullying; bullying program; classroom management; discipline*

I got tired of putting out little fires. I felt there was a need for a program because students did not understand that certain types of behavior were bullying; gossiping, not letting another student sit beside you at lunch, and other types of bullying were prevalent. Bullying is much more than just hitting and shoving. This issue did not just involve school; it spilled over from outside aspects as well. Something had to be done.

—John Abraham, principal, Lincoln Middle School

As a teacher, I did not actually see bullying as a problem. I was surprised when Principal Abraham decided to start the Choices program. I was even more amazed when I saw the results of the student surveys—they certainly raised my awareness of the problem. Bullying is a huge problem; there is much work we can do. We realize that perhaps it is the students who can control bullying more than we do. We want them to feel empowered; they are the front lines in this battle.

—Mrs. Eleanor Wilson, eighth-grade teacher

It was the fall of 2002 when Lincoln Middle School principal John Abraham decided that he needed to take action. As he stood at the edge of the cafeteria, he looked out at the frenetic hustle and bustle of the school cafeteria. Some students were getting change from the cafeteria cashier, others were standing in line for drink refills, still others were excitedly gesturing as they breathlessly told their friends the latest news. Abraham smiled as he saw a group of boys sitting together, eating pizza and recounting last night's Little League football game. One of the boys reenacted his winning catch while the others laughed and cheered. Abraham overheard a group of girls talking about an online conversation during an instant messaging session last night. He smiled and shook his head as he scanned the rest of the room. His gaze locked in on a table toward the other side of the cafeteria, and his brow furrowed.

Aaron McKay sat alone at the table, playing with the salt and pepper shakers. "Boom, take that!" he snarled and smashed one of the plastic canisters on the other. His homeroom teacher, Mrs. Graham, cast a wary glance at him from three tables away and then continued chatting to her fellow teachers about the upcoming Thanksgiving break. She laughed out loud as she recounted a turkey basting horror story. Meanwhile, students at a nearby table snickered and pointed at Aaron. The seventh grader did not notice but busily realigned the shakers for another sequence. Now, other students turned in their chairs and were visibly amused. One called out Aaron's name; another threw a carrot at him. As the carrot glanced off his cheek, Aaron looked up, startled. The principal shouted out from across the room, and the students turned, ducked down their heads, and snickered. Mrs. Graham sighed, stood up, and yelled for the kids to line up to head for the restrooms.

Later that afternoon, John Abraham looked out the window of his office. As he listened to his messages, he listlessly jotted down a few notes. The district technologist had to repair some computers, a school bus had to be reserved for next week's field trip, and his equipment order had been delayed because holiday shipping was backed up. He hit the answering machine's delete button and rearranged a few items on his desk. He pushed back his chair, stood up, and straightened his tie.

"My school is in good order," he thought. But something tugged at the back of his mind as he looked out his office door's window to the now empty cafeteria. On paper, the school was doing fine. Accreditation was solid, test scores had risen during his 5-year tenure in all core subjects, and he had brought in some enthusiastic, hardworking new teachers. Yet the mental picture of Aaron sitting alone in the cafeteria gnawed at his stomach. "Can't we do better than that?" he mused.

Meanwhile, down the hall in a spacious classroom, LaQuilla sat in her orange plastic chair, legs tucked under her desk. She read a paragraph from *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and her language arts teacher, Mr. James, nodded. She finished and breathed a sigh of relief as Mr. James asked another student to elaborate on the section LaQuilla had just read. As LaQuilla brushed her long, curly hair behind her ears, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see a small, folded note thrust onto her desk. She glanced around furtively and opened it underneath the desk as Mr. James's voice droned on in the background.

"You've got mail!" the note read. "You're a loser! Everyone thinks that you wear clothes that belong on SpongeBob!" LaQuilla heard giggles from several desks behind her and Mr. James cleared his throat loudly. She had been getting similar messages during her instant messaging sessions the past couple nights; some girls from her class hated the fact that guys liked LaQuilla and that she received their attention. In fact, her mother had told her that she was being picked on because she was simply the most beautiful girl in the world. "I don't feel beautiful," she murmured to herself as she crumpled up the note and stuffed it into her backpack.

John Abraham cleared his throat as he called for the faculty's attention. Fifty-two pairs of eyes looked back at him, and he held up a small stack of yellow papers. "Can anybody tell me what this is?" he asked aloud, his voice full of emotion.

"Our paychecks?" wisecracked a math teacher from the back of the room. Other teachers laughed and made comments; many considered the weekly faculty meetings a big joke. Instead of smiling, Abraham shook his head grimly.

"Folks, I'm serious here," he said, and the snickering and whispered conversations came to a halt. "This is a stack of bus referrals from last month alone," he said solemnly. "Forty-nine incidents in 30 days," he declared, "and I'm starting to see a common theme.

"We have a problem with bullying here at Lincoln Middle School," he said. He heard a few muffled groans and saw some teachers glance across the room at one another and roll their eyes. "Hey, I know we all work at a middle school, but this is unacceptable. This problem spills out into these kids' Little League games, chat sessions, and of course onto the bus. We've got to see this as a problem. This is serious," he said.

"I've commissioned a poll to be taken here at Lincoln in order to gather some important data," he gestured toward the two counselors, who nodded. "We'll have the results to you by next week, and I've placed an article in your box [Matke, 2000] that I want everyone to read about bullying.

This problem goes much further than just the school bus or playground!” he said, his voice filled with passion. “This can negate all the hard work we’ve put in, it can render meaningless anything positive we’ve done! We need students to take ownership and start to respect each other!” He noticed teachers starting to nod in agreement. “We will continue this next week. I want everyone to read the article and consider this.”

Later that afternoon, as Abraham was preparing to leave, he heard a knock on his door. “Hello, Ms. Ramirez!” he nodded for his assistant principal to enter.

“Good message today, John!” Carrie said appreciatively. “I would agree with you, but I had no idea this was coming!” John nodded in response.

“It doesn’t seem like it’s been 6 years since I was working my way through all those administrative courses in grad school,” he chuckled. “But I could not help thinking that bullying is indeed a threat to our organization, and it is our organization that must address it!” He pulled a book off of his shelf and blew the dust off the cover.

“Carrie, a couple of researchers, Bolman and Deal [2002], pointed out that schools and classrooms, like other social systems, work best when needs are satisfied in a caring, trusting work environment. Showing concern for others and providing ample opportunities for participation and shared decision making are among the ways to enlist people’s commitment and involvement,” John explained.

“This plan could give us all ownership in our school climate situation and could save us a lot of trouble in the long run,” said Carrie. “I’m going to distribute this interesting finding by a recent Secret Service report [Dunne, 2000] that basically states that schools may make the best use of their resources by focusing on prevention and not by relying exclusively on law enforcement to respond to and resolve school-based attacks.”

John glanced through the article and said, “This is definitely worth sharing with the staff. Now let’s discuss what we have to do.”

A Needs Assessment

Several days later, a group of children sat in the school counselor’s office. “You’re all probably wondering why you are in this office,” explained Mrs. Barbara Hoi, the school guidance counselor. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble,” she chuckled, and the students smiled. “I am having a number of students from each grade answer some questions about what they think about safety here in school,” she continued. “Your answers will be confidential;

that means you don't have to write your name on your sheet and your identity will not be revealed."

"We want your honest opinions. If you don't want to answer any of these questions, that's fine. Feel free to simply return to class. We just want your honest responses; you can help us create an even better school!" The students nodded and Mrs. Hoi passed out surveys and pencils.

John and Carrie mulled over the finished surveys. Quite simply, they were amazed at the findings. They had interviewed a sample of 69 students from the middle school. The findings were organized by grade level and made the gravity of the Lincoln Middle School bullying situation perfectly clear.

"Wow, John! It looks like three fourths of our students have seen a number of verbal threats and racial tensions in the past year!" Ms. Ramirez leafed through the data. "It looks like a lot's going on in the hallways and before and after school."

"That's no surprise," said Abraham, "It definitely should be addressed. Look here," he pointed, "it looks like girls bully almost as much as boys."

"I could have told you that!" The assistant principal shook her head. "Girls can be pretty mean, too!" She pointed to the data, "Look at the 'Who you told?' sheet. It looks like students are keeping pretty quiet about it. In fact, about 80% of eighth graders say they did nothing after an incident occurred," she said.

"And that's an issue we must address," said John. "How can we empower the students and allow them to stand up to this nonsense?"

Carrie smiled, "Since you pulled out the old textbook last week, I thought I'd share something with you this week." She pointed to a passage about bullying and said, "A key question for us to ask is how can the school staff organize the school so as to make it as easy as possible to encourage children to learn to handle aggression appropriately [Thompson, Arora, & Sharp, 2002]? Like you said, it's definitely an organizational issue. Teachers can't do it all; we've got to empower the students," she said.

"I agree, and I picked this book up from the superintendent." John held up a big paperback. "He recommended that we take a look at it and said that it allowed for greater empowerment of teachers."

"Let's take a look," said Carrie. As she thumbed through the book she noted phrases like "empowerment," "democratic decision," and "entire staff" (Bonds & Stoker, 2000). "This is good stuff," she murmured.

"Take it and look over it this weekend," said John. "Let's discuss our plan on Monday before the faculty meeting and come up with an effective plan to empower the entire school community and allow for a shared decision making model like Bolman and Deal [2002] talked about!" Carrie nodded in agreement.

A Strategic Plan

“OK, folks, let’s talk bullying!” John Abraham’s voice boomed across the cafeteria. “What did you think about the bullies on the bus article?” A few teachers commented on the article’s practical suggestions. A math teacher sitting in the back of the room said, “I like the statement that it’s everyone’s problem.” A chorus of agreement rang through the room.

Carrie Ramirez chimed in, “I couldn’t agree more! John and I have been doing a lot of thinking about this too, and we feel like there’s something we can all do together.” She passed out a simple checklist. “This is based on Bonds and Stoker’s [2000] book called *Bully-Proofing Your School*, and it’s specifically designed for the middle school. It’s an easy read, and we got each grade level team a copy.” She distributed the books to the teachers.

John stood up. “We’re not going to pretend that this approach won’t take commitment, time, and effort on everybody’s part. But I can guarantee that Carrie and I are going to do what it takes to help empower this school to root out this problem. We want to keep the end goal in mind—creating a safe and caring school environment.

“Carrie and I have three goals for all of this; we want your input in how to make our plan work. First, we want to educate the students about all types of bullying. Second, we want the children to identify bullying in the school. Third, we want to challenge the entire school community to do something about it!” John noticed teachers nodding.

“In fact,” Carrie said, “the local Community Service Board has provided a \$3,000 grant for initial training of teachers who want to do this as professional development. And, if anyone is interested, tuition will be paid for teachers who want to enroll in the antibullying course at Eastern Mennonite University. If you want the credits, they’re yours! Now, let’s talk about this plan. Everyone take a look at the checklist.”

Laying Out a Framework

It was 7:30 p.m. and John was closing his briefcase when Carrie came into his office. “So what’d you think about the meeting?” she asked.

“I think it went well, the teachers seemed to really buy in. I like the name they gave this program—*Choices*. That’s a very appropriate description. Let’s go over the game plan the teachers came up with and then I’ve got to get home.” John looked at the clock and shook his hand.

“Here are the essential components that we came up with, and here is our revised checklist,” the assistant principal explained (see Table 1).

Table 1
Choices Checklist

Step	The Choices Program
1	Define mission to school—skit and assembly
2	Select students for Cadre—contact parents and students
3	Implement Choices Cadre—meet on regular basis
4	Regular feedback/meetings with students and teachers
5	Continued evaluation with staff; professional development credits, paid tuition for academic credits
6	Continued school community of implementation and overall direction of program

Source: Based on Bonds & Stoker, 2000.

“We have first decided to introduce this to the students by doing a skit next Wednesday in assembly. Art McManny is going to act as the bully, and Karen Cooper is going to stand up for her classmate!” John laughed as he imagined the math teacher and band director squaring off in front of the student body.

Ms. Ramirez continued, “We are going to emphasize that bullying can happen in a lot of ways, from shunning a classmate at lunch, to picking on their clothes, to the usual bus and playground stuff. We are going to emphasize that it will not be tolerated. We are also going to explain the bully-proofing cadre to the students—we will try to attract the students who really want to be there and we will explain the importance of peer mediation in all of this. The teachers helped identify a group of kids who are potentially good leaders and would perhaps be willing to stand up to a bully and confront any bully-type behavior. We are going to train a group of core leaders to start recognizing bullying as a problem. In fact, letters have already gone home to the parents about this.”

“We are going to send the message to the student body that we are behind this as a school; teachers are united here and the students will be as well,” mused John. “Okay, so we introduce the issue, we identify bullying, we discuss the cadre group of students who will serve. Now, do we have teacher interest in the courses?”

“That’s the good part,” answered the assistant principal. “I’ve had three teachers sign up for the course, and others are taking the seminar for professional development. I think the key is to continue meeting about this. You know, I think it’s important that the teachers don’t see this as another time-consuming phony empowerment thing. Let’s allow the teachers to go home at the bell on Thursdays since we’re talking about this on Wednesday afternoons,” Carrie suggested.

John nodded, "Yes, we've got to make this different from earlier bad experiences. This has got to work—those survey results were just plain scary."

During the next day's recess, one stocky boy approached a smaller peer. "Hey, J. W.! I saw a show about you the other night!" Brian walked up to fellow sixth grader J. W. on the playground. "It was called Jackass—that's what you are, you big buffoon!"

J. W. gulped, "Not again, man." Brian rode on J. W.'s bus and picked on him incessantly. He picked up his soccer ball and strolled across the field. A surly Brian followed, yelling "Buffoon, buffoon!" at a now embarrassed J. W.

"Hey, knock it off, Brian!" Samuel emerged onto the playground. "We know that name-calling is bullying."

"Beat it, Sam! I didn't touch J. W.!" an indignant Brian countered.

"Yes, but even name-calling is bullying and it could lead to a fight!"

"What are you going to do, tattletale?" sneered Brian, his dark eyes dancing with ridicule.

Samuel stood up straight. "I'd rather that we all resolve it right here. Let's call this quits and not have to go that route." He nodded over to Mr. McManny, "Or I can get him involved."

Brian's face softened and he said, "No big deal, I was just kidding," and shrugged his shoulders as he walked away.

"Thanks, Sam." J. W. looked up to the eighth grader. Samuel was a cool kid who was admired for his athletic skills, and J. W.'s eyes reflected his genuine gratitude.

"No problem, I don't mind keeping an eye out for you future halfbacks!" Sam laughed and gave J. W. a high five.

Later, during the slow summer weeks preceding the school year, the two administrators sat in John's office. "So what do we need to do to iron out the glitches in this?" asked Carrie. It was now the summer of 2003; almost a year had passed and she and John were now meeting to discuss the future of Choices.

"Well, it's not a perfect program, but it's certainly made a difference," said John. "I had Larry do some interviews of some members of the staff, such as administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers about the Choices program, so we have some feedback," continued John, thinking about how grateful he was that Larry, a social studies team leader and willing leader, had volunteered to lead the effort. "All we need to do is another student survey, perhaps a few months into the school year. We need to continue to develop our student leaders, particularly the new students like the sixth graders coming into Lincoln Middle. And we should continue to make sure that teachers are leading. Furthermore, it is vital that we stay up to date on current research

and organize a way to keep our faculty current with the research as well. I recently read an interesting book that indicates that there is a shift of student perception of bullying as more frequently verbal taunting rather than physical harm [Glover, Cartwright, & Gleeson, 1998]; we need to emphasize those key points again and again."

"I agree," said Carrie. "I've had some more teachers request the tuition credit so they can take the course; apparently word of mouth has gotten out that it was a relevant, effective course. As long as we continue to have teacher buy-in, this thing will work," the assistant principal said. "Bolman and Deal would be proud; I feel that we have enabled the caring, trusting work environment to become more prevalent. As an administrative team, I believe we should continue to prioritize, showing concern for others and providing ample opportunities for participation and shared decision making."

John nodded in agreement. "I think the big key is the fact that we've raised awareness of the situation. Teachers and students are on the lookout for this sort of thing. Bullying isn't cool. I think that it's considered a big honor to be a member of the Choices Cadre as well. I've had a number of parents ask me if their student can be a member; we might have to start having tryouts and cuts!" he laughed. "But seriously, we're well on our way to having dynamic, flexible learning environments all over. I read a book that discusses the inter-related aspects of teaching and learning [Moyle, 1992]—this effective organization is the key to ensuring a positive environment! I feel like our organization has improved remarkably, everyone is looking for the human resource component to be positive." He gave his assistant principal a high five and said, "Well, off to lunch duty!"

On a sunny, cool, autumn afternoon, LaQuilla waved to her friends as she boarded the bus. She was now an eighth grader, and she was a proud member of the Choices Cadre. She, along with a few of her fellow cadre members, had enjoyed more peaceful bus rides home. Sure, there were occasional incidents, but she enjoyed knowing that it was "cool" to act like a respectful, positive student. Heck, next year she was going to be in high school; it was time to start acting like an adult. She smiled. "I like being cool," she thought as she waved to her friends outside the bus.

Teaching Notes

Issues in School Leadership

1. How might this case have been different if the administrators had not taken the initiative?

2. Discuss relevant state laws regarding bullying. How might they be relevant in the eyes of the school community?
3. Identify some obligations of the school administration in terms of bullying prevention.
4. How could the administrative team ensure that there is buy-in from the teachers in regards to preventing bullying?
5. To what extent should students in the school be involved in addressing bullying?

Instructional Leadership

1. What are the responsibilities of the teachers in terms of targeting bullying?
2. What conditions in the classroom setting could help the teachers and students act proactively against bullying-type behavior?

Collaborative Discussion

1. What other approaches might the administrative team used in confronting the issue of bullying? (Discuss pros and cons.)
2. What approach could the division administrative (Central Office) team take in regards to bullying?

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